DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 101 232 CG 009 442

AUTHOR Shantz, Carolyn Uhlinger
TITLE Empathy in Relation to Social Cognitive Development.
PUB DATE Aug 74
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Convention (82nd, New Orleans, Louisiana, August 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS Affective Behavior; *Behavioral Science Research; *Children; *Cognitive Development; *Empathy; Literature Reviews; Research Needs; *Social Development; Speeches; Symposia

ABSTRACT

This review brings together some general findings on empathy that have emerged during the last decade of research with children. From a recent review of the research on social cognitive development (Schantz, in press), this paper responds to three specific questions: (1) What is empathy? (2) Under what conditions is empathy likely to occur? and (3) What types of judgements appear to be involved in an empathic response? The difficulty in conceptualizing empathy as something different from sympathy and projection, and the issue of empathy as a process or product, suggests that a more systematic "nomological network" is needed for the construct. That such a model has not evolved may be related to the fact that very little is known about the relationship of empathy to the ability to infer another's thoughts, capabilities, intentions, and perceptions. Given the importance in our society of prosocial behavioral development, it is particularly critical that more systematic investigation occur on the interrelationship between cognitive development and social behavior. (Author/PC)

ED101232

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

EMPATHY IN RELATION TO SOCIAL COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Carolyn Uhlinger Shantz
Wayne State University

CG 009 442

[1] Presented as part of a Symposium on the Concept of Empathy: Bond Between Cognition and Social Behavior, American Psychological Association meeting, New Orleans, Louisiana, September, 1974.

EMPATHY IN RELATION TO SOCIAL COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Carolyn Uhlinger Shantz
Wayne State University

My function here today is not to report on a specific study or two on empathy development, but rather to bring together some general findings that have emerged during the last decade of research with children on empathy. From a recent review of the research on social cognitive development (Shantz, in press), answers to three specific questions will be attempted: (1) What is empathy? (2) Under what conditions is empathy likely to occur? (3) What types of judgments appear to be involved in an empathic response?

What is Empathy? In the process of reviewing research on children's abilities to understand other's feelings, thoughts, intentions and perceptions, it was immediately clear that in research concerning inferences about other's feelings there was a unique problem: researchers were defining empathy in several different ways. The most frequent definition is cognitive--the child understands how another person feels. The other definition, primarily used by N. Feshbach and her collaborators, is affective--the child feels the same emotion as the other person. The usual procedures for assessing empathy involve presenting the child with a picture(s) and a verbal description of a situation, or a picture of a person with a particular facial expression, or both. If cognitive empathy is being assessed, the child is asked, "What is the child in the story feeling?" If affective empathy is being assessed, the child is asked, "How do you feel?" (in response to the presented material).

Without addressing the issue of the merits of each definition, there is an empirical question of the relation between these two types of behavior--

understanding and affectively sharing. Do children who feel like another feels also understand the other's feelings or are they only exhibiting a kind of emotional contagion? Are children who understand another's feelings, likely to share that same feeling? To assess this, cognitive and affective empathy were both examined by Mood, Johnson and Shantz (1973). Preschoolers were presented with familiar situations and each child asked how the story-child felt and how the child, himself, felt with the questions counterbalanced in order across the sample. By far the largest proportion of responses (40%) indicated accurate understanding but a different emotion felt by the subject. Very infrequently (17%) did children feel the same emotion and correctly understand the other's feelings. This study indicates then that with young children affective empathy is much less frequent than a correct understanding of another's feelings, and understanding is typically not accompanied by the same felt emotion, at least for this method of assessing the two types of empathy.

Under what conditions is empathy likely to occur? There are several studies which suggest the following answer: The likelihood of an empathic response (cognitive and/or affective) increases as the similarity between the child and who he is judging increases, and as the familiarity of the other's situation increases. First, let us focus on similarity. To date, similarity is defined empirically by sex, age, and race. Research by Deutsch (in press), Feshbach and Roe (1968), Klein (1970), Rothenberg (1970), and less directly, Flapan (1968) all indicate that empathy is more likely to occur if the child is judging another of the same age, the same sex, or the same race. The impact of these factors, by the way, is not peculiar to empathy; it emerges also in the area of person perception research. That is, when children are merely asked to describe people they know, the descriptions vary on a number of dimensions in quite complex ways depending on the sex and age of the child and

the sex and age of whom he is describing (Livesley and Bromley, 1973). One example from the more indirect evidence on the effects of age on descriptions of others comes from a study by Flapan (1968). Children described a movie episode they viewed from "Our Vines Have Tender Grapes." It was found that 6-year-olds made virtually no inferences about adults' feelings in the episode, but fairly frequently made inferences about children's feelings--a finding that comes as no surprise, probably, to many parents!

Why does similarity have such an effect? Probably by a process of simple generalization. The child may generalize from himself in that he knows how he felt in the past in that particular situation and he assumes a person like him (same sex and/or same age) would feel the same emotion. He may generalize from others he knows who are like the person he's judging, a kind of normative expectancy. In short, self-descriptions and normative expectancies may well account for the documented accuracy of young children in predicting another's emotional response if the other is highly similar to the child. That holds for emotions of happiness, sadness, fear and anger. There is virtually no information about empathy for feelings of jealousy, disgust, etc. It is noteworthy that about 20 years ago Cronbach (1956) dealt a substantial blow to research on adults' social sensitivity by noting that similarity between the adult judge and "judgee" combined with the adult's tendency to assume similarity resulted in spurious accuracy scores. The adults who looked socially sensitive were often just accurately describing themselves. Unless similarity between the child and the person being judged is controlled or systematically varied, empathic responses in children, suggestive of social sensitivity, may be primarily the child's own feelings and thoughts attributed to others. This direction of attribution--from self to another person--is projection, not empathy, as Chandler (1974) has noted.

The other dimension that appears important is familiarity: the more familiar the child is with the other's situation, the greater the probability of empathic responding. Familiarity seems to have been the basic issue in a recent controversy between Borke (1972) and Chandler and Greespan (1972). Borke (1971) found that preschoolers were quite accurate in predicting another's emotional response to simple situations, leading her to the concludion that preschoolers were not such egocentric creatures as Piaget had painted them--indeed, they were probably role-taking. Chandler and Greenspan (1972) objected that the method did not support such inferences. The situations that children judged were highly familiar to them--losing a toy, eating a favorite snack, etc., and accuracy could be based on describing their own response to such situations or normative information about how most people feel in such situations. Again, simple generalization for situations much like those the child has had seems the likely basis for accuracy, and not more complex strategies such as role-taking.

Now the general developmental findings indicate that preschool children and children in the early elementary grades demonstrate quite consistent understanding of the contingency or relation between simple emotions and simple, familiar situations (e.g., Borke, 1971; Feshbach and Roe, 1968), and the relation between simple emotions and certain facial expressions (Izard, 1971). Since most methods of assessing empathy use situations highly familiar to the child and "target" people who are highly similar to the child, it appears likely that the accuracy of young children is based either on self-description or normative information. It should be noted that these developmental findings are based almost entirely on identification or predictions of four emotions--happiness, sadness, fear and anger.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

What Types of Judgments are Involved in Empathic Responding?

To this point, we have noted two particular types of judgment: self-judgment and normative judgments. To recapitualte, self-judgments are essentially judgments of how one felt or how one would feel in a situation and one assumes the other person has the same feeling as one would have. The assumption of identity is often called egocentrism in young children, and "assumed similarity" in adults. The normative judgment is the child's knowledge of how "most people" or the "average person" feels in a situation, or how "most people" or the "average person" feels with a particular facial expression. Procedures which provide children with only situational information, as Borke's Interpersonal Perception Test, appear to assess only self or normative judgments, e.g., how the self or "most people" respond to losing a toy.

There is a third type of judgment, called a "differential judgment," in which the child judges how a particular individual feels in a particular situation. The method of assessment of differential judgments requires, of course, the more "ecologically valid" procedure of providing both situational and facial cues to the child for his judgment. However, providing both types of cues is no guarantee that differential judgments are involved. For example, in the Affective Situation Test (Feshbach and Roe, 1968) the child is presented with a story about a situation, and a series of slides showing a situation and the central characters facial expression. A correct assessment of the story-character's feelings (cognitive empathy) or matched affect (affective empathy) may be a self-description, a normative-description or a differential description. There is no way to tell since all the available cues--specifically facial and situational--are consistent and normative. Thus the child could respond directly to the child's situation, to the child's facial expression or both as he or "most people" would, or he could be making a differential judgment.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

There are some procedures which appear to maximize the likelihood of obtaining differential judgments. One procedure is to increase the dissimality between the child and whom he is judging and increase the dissimilarity between the other's situation and those situations the child has experienced himself. These differences serve to make generalization from the self less likely. Rothenberg (1970), for example, have children judge adults (not children, as is usually done) in situations which the child has probably not experienced himself (e.g., having no advanced warning that one has to prepare dinner for guests about to arrive at one's door). Another method is a conflict paradigm (e.g., Burns and Cavey, 1957; Chandler and Greenspan, 1972; Iannotti and Meacham, 1974): the emotion experienced by a particular individual conflicts and is non-normative with the situation the individual is in. For example, a child cries upon receiving a gift (Chandler and Greenspan, 1972) or a child smiles as a doctor approaches with a long needle (Burns and Cavey, 1957). Since, presumably, neither the child-judge himself nor most people smile at such doctors or cry in response to gifts, an accurate response would seem to be based on making a judgment about this particular individual's feelings in this particular situation, i.e., a differential judgment. What is demanded for an accurate judgment is that the child discriminate both facial and situational cues and "weigh" facial cues more than situation cues. Since there are indications that children, as well as adults, tend to spontaneously weigh situational cues quite heavily in predicting or describing emotional responses of individuals, this procedure is a means of assessing the degree to which the child can do the opposite--weigh facial cues ("a particular individual") more than situational cues.

Two comments. Studies which have used procedures such as these that seem

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

more likely to elicit differential judgments (Burns and Cavey, 1957); Chandler and Greenspan, 1972; Rothenberg, 1970) indicate that reliable accuracy in judging emotions does not usually appear until middle childhood even though the emotions being assessed are happy, sad, fear and anger. These are the same emotions which preschoolers can judge quite accurately given only situational information (e.g., Borke, 1971) or only facial cues (e.g., Izard, 1971), or consistent situational and facial cues (Feshbach and Roe, 1968), provided the situations are highly familiar. The second comment is to note that among adults there appears to be two rather independent social judgment skills: accurate normative or sterotypic judgments about others, and accurate differential judgments about others (Taguiri, 1969). Whether this is true of children is not known. A question for future research is to clarify the extent to which self and normative judgmental ability vs. differential judgmental ability show developmental sequencing and/or individual differences.

Conclusions. The difficulty in conceptualizing empathy as something different than sympathy and projection and the issue of empathy as a process or product suggest that a more systematic "nomological network" is needed for the construct. In fact, a theory or model of social understanding seems required. Some extension of the construct has suggested here today in this symposium, in the attempts to more exactly define and explain the bases of empathy. For example, one emphasis is on affective matching in which understanding and role-taking skills are necessary but not sufficient (Feshbach and Kuckenbecker, 1974) and another emphasis is on the cognitive response ("genuine understanding") which assumes an affective response as a necessary concomittant (Chandler, 1974). All past and current definitions are notably different than the meaning Lipps gave empathy when he coined the term--"objective motor mimicry" (Taguiri, 1969). But preferences for certain definitions may pale when confronted with constructing

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

decent methods of assessment, e.g., measuring affective response other than by self-report, or measuring "genuine understanding." But it is probably through this process of constructing methods and differentiating empathy from related concepts that some consensus will be reached on what empathy is and is not within a larger framework or model of social understanding. That such a model has not evolved may be related to the fact that very little is known about the relationship of empathy to the abilities to infer another's thoughts, capabilities, intentions, and perceptions. A second notable gap in research seems to reflect the traditional insularity between cognitive research and social behavioral research. Despite a great deal of theorizing and speculation, there is relatively little study of empathy in relation to social behavior. Given the importance in our society of prosocial behavioral development, it is particularly critical that more systematic investigation occur on the impact of cognitive development on social behavior and social behavior on cognitive development.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

REFERENCES

Borke, H. Interpersonal perception of young children: Egocentrism or empathy? Developmental Psychology, 1971, 5, 263-269.

Borke, H. Chandler and Greenspan's 'Ersatz Egocentrism:' A Rejoinder. Developmental Psychology, 1972, 7, 107-109.

Burns, N. and Cavey, L. Age differences in empathic ability among children. Canadian Journal of Psychology, 1957, 11, 227-230.

Chandler, M.J. Accurate and Accidental Empathy. Paper presented at the American Psychological Association meeting, New Orleans, La., September, 1974.

Chandler, M.J. and Greenspan, S. Ersatz egocentrism: A reply to H. Borke. Developmental Psychology, 1972, 7, 104-106.

Cronbach, L.J. Processes affecting scores on 'understanding others' and 'assumed similarity.' Psychological Bulletin, 1955, 52, 177-193.

Deutsch, F. Lower class preschoolers' perception of affective responses and interpersonal behavior in story sequences: A question of similarity of person. Developmental Psychology, in press.

Feshbach, N.D. Empathy: An interpersonal process. Paper presented at the American Psychological Association meeting, Montreal, Canada, 1973.

Feshbach, N.D. and Kuchenbecker, S.Y. A three component model of empathy. Paper presented at the American Psychological Association meeting, New Orleans, La., September, 1974.

Feshbach, N.D. and Roe, K. Empathy in six and seven year olds. Child Development, 1968, 39, 133-145.

Flapan, D. Children's understanding of social interaction. New York: Teacher's College Press, 1968.

Iannotti, R.J. and Meacham, J.A. The nature, measurement, and development of empathy. Paper presented at the Eastern Psychological Association meeting, Philadelphia, Penn., April, 1974.

Izard, C.E. The face of emotion. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971.

Klein, R. Some factors influencing empathy in six and seven year old children varying in ethnic background. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, 1970.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Livesley, W.J. and Bromley, D.B. Person perception in childhood and adolescence. London: Wiley, 1973.

Mood, D., Johnson, J. and Shantz, C.U. Young children's understanding of the affective states of others. Paper presented at the Southeast Regional meeting of the Society for Research on Child Development, 1973.

Rothenberg, B. Children's social sensitivity and the relationship to interpersonal competence, intrapersonal comfort, and intellectual level. DDevelopmental Psychology, 1970, 2, 335-350.

Shantz, C.U. The development of social cognition. In M. Hetherington (Ed.), Review of Child Development Research, Vol. 5. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, in press.

Taguiri, R. Person perception. In G. Lindzey and E. Aronson (Eds.), The handbook of social psychology, Vol. 3. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969.